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Partnering to Improve Education: Lessons From Charter Schools

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Nearly everyone from education reformers to policymakers and the general public agrees: The public education system needs to improve. The federal No Child Left Behind Act has made this painfully obvious. Two years after its passage, 50 percent of all urban districts and nearly 25 percent of suburban districts have identified at least one school in need of improvement, according to a recent study by the Center on Education Policy.

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Part of the problem is that public schools lack the knowledge and expertise they need to build capacity to improve themselves. Over the past several decades, organizations in policy arenas outside of education have built capacity through partnerships in areas as diverse as welfare reform, public health care, transportation, and prison management. Based on the benefits of collective action, nonprofit, for-profit, and public organizations work together to solve problems beyond the capacity of any one organization.

Some traditional public schools have experimented with partnerships, but charter schools have been particularly apt to do so. Charter school operators experience operational challenges that often push them into forming partnerships, and laws in many states encourage such outside involvement. Also, exemptions from many district and state regulations enable charter schools to seek partnerships more readily than traditional schools can. If there were a precedent for using partnerships to build capacity, it would be found in charter schools. Thus, we studied their approach to see what lessons it might hold.

We undertook a two-year study of charter school partnerships across the nation in a sample of 11 states. We visited 22 schools and interviewed nearly 150 charter school leaders and leaders from their partner organizations: businesses, colleges and universities, faith-based organizations, municipal offices, museums, and social-service agencies. We found that charter schools had done some creative thinking about service delivery and the allocation of resources. Partnerships with other organizations provided charter schools with a wealth of human, financial, physical, and organizational resources. We also identified the elements that helped partnerships succeed and thrive over time, organized around the following six

lessons:

- *Weigh the benefits and costs of partnering.* Many charter school leaders reported that their partners provided resources crucial to the school's survival. Well-known community-based organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club or the local YMCA, provided access to facilities and increased the credibility of start-up charter schools. Educational management organizations, or EMOs, brought business and management expertise to the partnership, helping with hiring, contracting, budgeting, and other business tasks. Perhaps most important, partnerships helped expand curriculum options for charter school students. For example, a partnership between the Construction Careers Center, a charter high school in St. Louis, and the Associated General Contractors labor union provided students with hands-on learning experiences in the construction industry.

However, leaders reported that partnerships also required resources—time, financial outlay, and human resources—to build, maintain, and sustain the relationship. Further, partnering can have political costs. Organizations that partner with charter schools may share in the blame if students fail to perform to expectations, while charter schools sometimes face local opposition when they partner with for-profit EMOs or faith-based organizations. Because of these potential costs, school leaders spoke about the process of selective partnering, rather than agreeing to work with "every partner that walks through the door."

- *Choose your partner well.* Leaders spoke about the need to choose specific partners carefully and stressed the importance of trust between partner organizations. Partnerships born out of prior personal or working relationships often meant that those involved had confidence that their partners "would deliver."

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Leaders also reported that good partnerships existed when organizations shared goals or had common philosophical approaches to education. For example, Boulder Preparatory High School, a charter school in Colorado, partnered with a public social-service agency called Impact that had a history of serving at-risk adolescents. A school leader said that the partnership was successful because "we have a common belief that education is critical for kids to be successful and contributing citizens."

In some cases, the specialized curriculum of a charter school, such as an arts-based program or a service-learning focus, complemented partners' areas of expertise. In one example, the Palm Beach Maritime Academy, a charter elementary school in Florida specializing in oceanography, partnered with the Palm Beach Maritime Museum: "The museum complements our curriculum so completely; it's what their collection and expertise is in," the school leader said.

Partners were also sought that were "willing to give as much as they get." In a partnership in California, student-teachers from the University of San Francisco's Oakland campus provided the East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School's elementary students with individualized attention, while the charter school provided the student-teachers with "the

opportunity to develop lessons and gain hands-on experience."

- *Clearly define the partnership.* Agreements between partners in our study ranged from informal "handshakes," to more structured memoranda of understanding, to contracts or leases with legally binding obligations. Informal relationships benefited from an inherent flexibility, but leaders found frustration in having to start from scratch when leadership changed. More formal memoranda, contracts, or leases have less ambiguity about expected roles and responsibilities. But formal agreements sometimes created a climate of "enforcement," making a relationship seem too rigid.

An accountability plan was a critical part of defining the partnership. The more advanced plans detailed the goals and responsibilities of the partners, the consequences of poor performance, and a course of action to terminate the partnership. Partners held each other accountable in a number of ways, including formal and informal feedback from teachers and students, periodic audits, and performance reports to boards of directors.

- *Create structures for participation.* Each new partnership needs to define governance and decisionmaking procedures. While some partnerships chose to use informal gatherings, or hallway conversations, to address issues on an ad hoc basis, others adopted formal committees that met at regular intervals. At times, a board of directors comprising members from each organization became the main decisionmaking body for the partnership. In other cases, responsibilities were split between the charter school and its partners: Often, school administrators had authority over the day-to-day running of the school, and the partner helped define long-term policy and direction.

Regardless of the governance structure implemented, leaders spoke about the importance of fostering open communication in which teachers and staff members were encouraged and expected to share their ideas. This type of bottom-up information flow, whether through formal memos and meetings or through informal conversations and e-mails, helped coordinate activities, fine-tune programs, and increase buy-in to the partnership.

- *Focus on leadership.* Several crucial leadership roles were evident in the charter school partnerships we studied. First was the role of champion: "visionaries" or "cheerleaders" for the partnership who rallied support by bringing partners on board and convincing members of their own organization that the partnership was worth their time and effort. In another role, architects built structures to institutionalize the partnership and to encourage participation by partner members. Leaders known as "information hubs" balanced the flow of information within and across organizations. Other leaders served as liaisons to the external environment, buffering the partnership from various demands and searching for funding opportunities.

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- *Evaluate the partnership's progress.* Interviews revealed that charter school partnerships had a wide range of objectives, from improving student attitudes, behavior, and achievement, to enhancing the quality of the instructional program, to increasing public

interest and support for the school. Whatever the objective, evaluating a partnership's progress helped leaders assess the value of the partnership.

Some evaluations revealed that a need formerly met by a partner could now be met alone: In these cases, partnerships were altered to meet new needs, or terminated if they had "run their course." Other evaluations led partners to increase involvement. In one example, a for-profit personal-training studio in rural Georgia called Next Level, which was run by a former professional football player, partnered with Bishop Hall Charter School, a charter high school using a curriculum composed of integrated thematic units. Next Level planned to expand the sports program offered at the charter high school to weekends and after school, and to hire some of the students as work-study employees.

Building capacity and resources in the public education system is the first step in a broader push to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education. Community by community, we need to build strong partnerships to improve the delivery of educational services. Schools, along with nonprofit, for-profit, and other public organizations, will need to work together to accomplish this. We all have a role to play in helping K-12 educators meet the challenge of preparing students to achieve high learning standards. Charter schools have served as a testing ground for the partnership idea and have helped point the way.

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